

# IDRC FEATURE

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*A monthly features service on  
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## THE NEWSPAPER AS AN AGENT OF DEVELOPMENT

by NARENDRA AGGARWAL

India is a land of villages - 500,000 to be precise. Perhaps that is what prompted the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, to affirm that India lives in the villages. How true, even today, after three decades of independence.

"Our Village Chhatera" used to be like any one of the half a million villages in the country till 1969. This is the story of how Chhatera was put on the path to self-sustained growth thanks to the efforts of a big city newspaper.

The Indian newspaper is very largely an urban phenomenon. It was with the object of opening a little urban window on rural India that the Hindustan Times decided in 1969 to start a regular fortnightly column depicting life in a typical north Indian village. The choice fell on Chhatera.

And so began project Chhatera -- an experiment in development journalism -- as a result of the far sight and vision of the newspaper's new editor, Mr B.G. Verghese. In the nine years the Chhatera project was on, a live example was placed before the Indian Press as to how it could play the role of a catalyst to rural development.

Chhatera is about 40 kms north-west of Delhi, a short distance off the Grand Trunk Road, in the neighbouring state of Haryana. But it lay in the 'V' of two flood water drains which at that time were unbridged and thus the village was cut off from civilization for a major part of the year.

The village has a population of 1,500 made up of the land-owning Jats, the Brahmins and the landless Harijans, or the lowest caste. It is primarily an agricultural village. Yields and incomes were low when the project started as new high-yielding seeds and techniques of cultivation had not reached the village. The lowest caste were not even assured of two square meals a day.

To be truthful the project began with the object of purely reporting rural India to our highly urbanized readers. It was on February 23, 1969 that "Our Village Chhatera" made its appearance as the cover-story of the Hindustan Times Sunday magazine. Using a lucid style, bold headlines and breath-taking pictures of the countryside, it was an instant hit with many readers. Some, however, said the editor had gone insane. Imagine giving so much space and attention to 'a' village. Where was the 'news', they asked.

The plan of action was that a team consisting of two reporters and a photographer would visit the village every alternate Sunday. The stories and pictures would appear the following Sunday. The editor would himself accompany the team two out of every three visits. The schedule was kept up unbroken for nine years until with the change of editors the Chhatera project was dropped in 1977.

With the splash given in the newspaper, the villagers overcame their initial shyness, the ice was broken and soon friendships were established. In the beginning the village was described, as also its institutions and people. Gradually the villagers began to tell us about their woes.

The old hanging rope bridge across the drain was decaying. Some persons had lost their lives while crossing the bridge during the monsoon to reach their fields which lay on the other side. The old primary school building had collapsed. We wrote of a hundred-odd children attending classes together in the village common place. The well from which the Harijans drew water was crumbling making it unsafe, and resulting in the water use in the community going down.

Besides highlighting the problems we wrote of how the villagers celebrated their festivals, marriages, the change of seasons, the gaiety that marked the bringing in of every good harvest home, villages fashions, old traditional jewellery, the aspirations of the young and how they looked to the future -- all human interest stories.

As we highlighted the problems, the authorities and others began to take note. The district officials visited Chhatera and a regular concrete bridge was sanctioned. A year-and-a-half later traffic was moving across the new bridge. The Rural Housing Wing of the School of Architecture in Delhi helped design and build the school using cheap local materials, also motivating the villagers to collect contributions to raise it to a middle school. A group of young social workers from Delhi lived with the Harijans and helped rebuild their well and also a soak-pit near it.

Teams from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and the Indian Agricultural Research Institute camped in the village and provided simple medicare and extension about new cropping patterns and farming practices. This was followed up through fortnightly visits for several years. A leading tractor manufacturer organized a Farmers Club.

Villagers from neighbouring areas came to see all this new activity. Our Village Chhatera had become a change-agent, and publicity an input in development. Villagers still tell visitors that until the Hindustan Times came, not even a political worker had visited to canvass for votes. But with the interest aroused by the newspaper there was a stream of visitors. The chairman of a national bank came and decided to open a branch which alone has since financed the purchase of 78 tractors, including some under a World Bank scheme, besides mobilizing over Rs one million as deposits.

The Union Communications Minister came and established a part-time post office besides sanctioning a telephone connection for the village. The Vice President came to inaugurate a Lions Club eye camp. The American Ambassador came to see how change was taking place in a village as a result of practical development communications.

One unique factor of project Chhatera was that neither the newspaper nor any outside agency spent any money. Mr Verghese held that that approach had already been tried. In Chhatera only time and know-how could be given. It was impressed on the villagers that they must help themselves if they wanted to stand on their feet.

In February 1977 the newspaper dropped project Chhatera as suddenly as it had picked up the village exactly nine years earlier. But the villagers, banded together under the "Village Welfare Association", a registered society, are carrying on the work. Having joined hands with the National Dairy Research Institute and Action For Production, Chhatera is well on the way to ushering in a "white revolution."

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*Narendra Aggarwal, Staff Correspondent and Feature Writer for the Hindustan Times, New Delhi, worked on project Chhatera under the guidance of the newspaper's editor, Mr B.G. Verghese.*



A health auxiliary discusses health and sanitation with villagers on the banks of the Orinoco in Venezuela.

PHOTO: Neill McKee  
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